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ABSTRACT

Writing centers have been working diligently to create a centripetal space to draw as many faculty and students into its collaborative learning process as possible. The degree to which writing centers have succeeded in this mission should now lead beyond the sanctum of the centers and even beyond the validated space of satellite centers. The University of Alaska-Fairbanks Writing Center and Computer Lab, which began a viable satellite for Native students in their counseling center, has now begun programs in tutoring students and training tutors throughout the state via telephone and fax machine. Adventurous teachers using simple technology can overcome both physical distance and cultural boundaries. Physical proximity and authorized centers can overly determine the roles of tutor and students. Telecommunications and use of Yup'ik speakers as co-tutors, created a "virtual space" of mutually authoritative speakers in dialogue. (Author/RS)

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**"The Writing Center as a Virtual Dialogic Space"**

I founded the Writing Center at University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1986 as an adjunct faculty member with funds donated by the President of the student government. The student senate demanded its money back at the first meeting , and the Chancellor temporarily took over the funding. From this rather inauspicious start, the Center prospers today. The legislature funds the Center as a line item. This fall the students ranked us "the most highly used service on campus"; 48% of the students interviewed had used the center and gave it the highest "satisfaction rating" among the campus services. In addition--and most significantly for the subject of space today--four years ago, we moved into a large well-lighted room equipped with 6 PC's and a Mac, a meeting-waiting area, reception area and plenty of space for three 8-foot conference tables and bookcases for a resource library. I set out to make this space indispensable to the university community and to draw as many faculty and students into its collaborative mission as possible. The degree to which we have succeeded in the centripetal mission has led to enough confidence in ourselves and support at rural campus sites to adapt our techniques to far more centrifugal forces. We now tutor students and train tutors via telephone and FAX machine at multiple sites throughout the state of Alaska.

A POWERFUL CENTRIPETAL FORCE: The Writing Center Space

The tutors and I embellish, utilize, and defend the hard won space the center now occupies. We collaborate with the Art Department, which hangs advanced painting student pieces every semester. We advertise frequently--always conscious of the

metaphors our banners, posters, and flyers convey. We keep accurate, computerized records to defend our existence and the need for such a large central space. In the fall train the English TA'sl in this room. We hold faculty roundtables on composition theory and practice in this space. The Graduate Students not only staff the center but they also hold their organizational meetings there. The faculty poetry group met there until the MFA program became so large no one had time for extracurricular reading groups. I wrote the initial guidelines for the writing-intensive courses in the Core Curriculum and helped organize and lead workshops for faculty to teach them. In short, the UAF Writing Center and Computer Writing Lab is the recognizable locus for writing both in English and across the curriculum.

The effect of these eight years of effort has been to create a strong centripetal force. I wanted every student physically drawn to, but not required to come to, an attractive and comfortable space in which to encounter well-trained tutors in a collaborative dialogue. We've progressed from approximately 500 student sessions with 3 tutors per year in 1986 to almost 2,000 sessions in a single semester with almost 30 tutors in fall 1993. Students from 61 different majors came to the center. Many of them were working on papers other than those for English classes. History can claim 289 sessions, education used 68, and biology assignments used 25. In all, essays in 33 subjects other than English came into the Writing Center. We have overcome the reality, if not the perception, of serving only a remedial function for the English Department: We conducted 253 sessions with seniors and 55 with graduate students. So much for success, let's look at the shortcomings and the outreach, or centrifugal, solutions we have evolved.

## EXCHANGING ONE CENTRIPETAL SPACE FOR ANOTHER

Our failure in attracting Native Students to the center forced me to question the need to bring students to our physical space. This realization was reached only gradually. In spring 1991, we set up "The Writing Center Connection" in Rural Student Services

[RSS], another centralized space set aside for students from Rural Alaska--most of them Alaska Natives. Native students, who make up only about 6% of the university population find a home in RSS with their friends, relatives, and people with related values and experiences around them. A symbol of this cultural identity for me is the RSS chest freezer. They stock their own freezer with salmon, moose, seal oil or whatever elders and students and their families contribute. Rural student advisors have their offices around this space, and the students have their own Mac lab.

Rural Students like their center. It took me more than a semester to learn to respect their preference in choice of place and to use it positively. My original plan was to "invade" this space and entice clients to our space in the writing center proper by sending popular teachers (TA's) with the promise of better results in their classes and a Yup'ik tutor in the regular center. This tutor, Ringo Jimmy, was already a respected peer of students in RSS since he also tutored and counseled there.

The results were dismal. The friendly, persuasive TA's managed to sign up a dozen or two rural students over the course of the semester, but fewer than 10 actually kept the appointment. These students were too polite to refuse verbally, but they were talking with their feet. At first, I refused to "hear" them. Finally, the tutors talked me into letting them actually tutor at RSS. We negotiated with the advisors. They very generously gave us a table and chairs, wall space for a sign, and encouraged students who came to them for writing advice to use the tutors. We conducted 45 sessions with a tutor working 12 hours a week for 14 weeks in the spring of 1991. This was a triumph. We doubled the number of sessions the following fall, and we have improved every semester since.

We tried the same approach with graduate foreign students. I sent ESL tutors or TA's with a scientific background to the Geophysical Institute Library. The Vice Chancellor for Graduate Programs wanted readable theses and dissertations. Unlike our experience with RSS, we met with almost total defeat. The only person who used the

tutors more than once was the American-born, English-speaking library work study student. There are many complicated reasons why this "satellite" didn't work, but the sense of an empowering place was not a motivating force for the graduate students. When enough pressure was exerted from the graduate office, they found ways of getting editing help. Many actually did come to the center.

The combination of limited success with one satellite and failure with a second brought the issue of how ownership of a physical space influences or determines authority, responsibility, and collaboration. The Athabaskan, Yup'ik and Inupiat students in RSS gradually taught us to loosen the physical boundaries of the proper space for communication and to give up the authority of place endowed by our own furniture and authority-affirming paraphernalia, such as our reception desk, waiting-room looking chairs, and PC's with our programs on them. By moving to their space, we leveled--at least a little--and expanded the field of dialogue. By virtue of being the minority in their space, we had to acknowledge and adapt to the customs of the place and the people in it. For example, their space is noisier; people eat and drink on the study tables. We had to practice other skills, too, such as waiting an appropriate length of time for replies to either statements or questions. We learned to take an even less directive stance.

The most important first step was to give up our centripetal space for theirs. Acknowledging their authority has changed rural student attitudes toward us and--I will claim here anyway--toward the whole writing program. As the number of tutors who work at RSS grows with the changes made each semester, the advisors tell me the students (and the advisors themselves) are less apprehensive about who [in the counselor's words] the students "get stuck with" for English classes. At a recent meeting--with the Dean in attendance--the advisors announced that English was the only department that had "done anything for rural students." This statement is not true. First, the UAF Writing Center is not the English Department. Secondly, some departments obviously do more than we do. For example, Cross Cultural Communications, Alaska Native Studies, and

Anthropology work extensively with Native students. Rural Student Services sees these departments as part of the family, and we are not. Actually, the fact that we are NOT family makes the dialogic process possible. We are outsiders, and as such we can function differently. Our relationship is not one of identification, but of statement and response. In the best collaborative relationship, a "dialogic" one, both parties both have the authority to be principal speaker and to respond honestly. Through this dialog the parties take responsibility for the changes they make.

"Dialogic" means more than merely two people talking "in dialogue." Carol Emerson defines it in the glossary to her translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's essays collected under the title, The Dialogic Imagination, Dialogism "is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole--there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). Helen Rothschild Ewald has touched upon some of the complications and competing interpretations of this process for composition studies in the October 1993 College Composition and Communication ( 331-348), but I'm hoping to avoid theory by showing how we learned to relinquish enough "authority" to make the interaction of meanings significant enough for Native students that they could both respond productively to writing assignments and take responsibility for their "answering" voice. Put briefly, we had to leave campus--but only virtually.

## CHANGING FROM PHYSICAL TO VIRTUAL SPACE

If I no longer relied upon the centrality of our space to draw students to the writing center, I also had to relinquish the centralized space of others for "virtual" space. Two different programs have evolved out of this new loosening of boundaries: Tele-fax tutoring and Tele-fax tutor training. The physical size of Alaska, the dispersal of its people and the mission of the university to serve those people has led to refined concepts of "distance delivery," which might mean merely correspondence courses to teachers in

"the Lower 48." In Alaska teachers on the main campuses and at rural sites in the villages teach courses in classrooms, but some may teach the majority of their students by distance delivery. That is, they establish "a bridge" in Anchorage with Alascom (AT&T) and students call a central number to "attend class." The professor and students could be anywhere as long as they have access to a telephone. Generally, the teacher is at the rural site, and her students are at home. The student must write for this class having only the voice of a teacher they have never met as the audience and evaluator. The tele-fax tutoring program offers another voice, a collaborative rather than an evaluating one.

In the Fall of 1992, with the help of a grant from the UAF President's Special Projects Fund, a former UAF tutor, Jerah Chadwick, and I launched the tele-fax tutoring service using his students as a base. Jerah, who is now an assistant professor at the Interior Campus at Unalaska , is as remote as a $900 round-trip plane ride from Fairbanks or instantly accessible by telephone and fax. In order to get the news to other students, we lobbied their instructors, who are located as close as a block from the Fairbanks campus and as far away as Nome. The news is spreading electronically with a speed that greatly reduces space as an obstacle. Rather, the lack of physical presence sets up creative opportunities.

Once the professors are sold on the tutoring service, they forward our flyers or let us speak to their classes via tele-conference. The students FAX in their papers to our 800-number, request a tutoring appointment, and give us their phone number. We call them back on their night of choice, and tutoring begins. The session usually opens with a short chat about how whaling is going in Savoonga, or the weather in the Pribilofs--that is, some subject about which the student is far more expert than the tutor. Once dialogue becomes comfortable, the subject shifts to the paper, which the student holds in the original and the tutor has as a FAX copy.

A study I am currently running seems to indicate that students using this environment speak longer and control the dialogue for longer sustained periods than do

students in the center or the satellites. The program is still very small. We conducted 32 sessions in fall 1993, but we logged 51 sessions in spring 1994. The students and tutors are enthusiastic: we have faithful callers, and tutors never want to transfer back to the center. Perhaps the novelty is part of their enthusiasm, but all agree the sound and feel is far more collaborative. Despite the collaborative intent of the center, we found the tele-fax require the tutor to give up several attributes of power: ownership of space, physical superiority or apparent greater age, and possession of the paper:

1. No physical space defines who is the authority: no receptionist, no lovely plants, no challenging art or cartoons, no computers with somebody else's program on them.

2. No physical differences [with the notable exception of sex] distinguish the two collaborators: no physical mass, even age is difficult to determine.

3. No one has complete power of possession of the paper. In fact, the inferior quality of the tutor's FAX copy contributes to student's power. The tutor often must ask for clarification of matters they truly do not understand, such as page order and legibility. These are not "test" questions asked by a superior who already knows the answer.

4. Most importantly, the tutor cannot write on the paper. She cannot write any comments, sketch organizational patterns or scribble sample comma splice correction models. The tutor must rely completely on oral directions.

The direction of discourse changes from the tutor questioning the paper's content or form to one of the tutor persuading the student to adopt suggestions for change. The student must respond in writing or NOT. I think the student's authority emerges far more naturally in this setting than if we had used E-mail. Computer-assisted interaction on a paper is still focused on the paper rather than the student.

Our second "distance delivery" based program is even more collaborative since it entails tutors tutoring tutors. In the spring of 1993 another former TA/tutor, Carolyn Kremers, and I began a tele-fax tutor training program for learning center tutors at the

Kuskokwim Campus. This rural site of the University of Alaska is a former community college which runs a two-year program in Bethel, Alaska. Carolyn had been hired in part to train the tutors. Bethel is over 400 miles from any road and more distant than that from Fairbanks. Our former centralized, or centripetal, experience of working in the UAF Writing Center gave Carolyn and I the confidence to bridge the physical distance and to enter the centrifugal field of "virtual space." We did, however, underestimate the undergraduate tutors' sensitivity to the centripetal power of the TA's authority and to the intimidating power of "the main campus."

After introducing ourselves to each other over conventional distance delivery tele-conference, we sent them a 10-minute homemade video, "Writing Center: The Movie." The Bethel tutors sent us an autobiographical booklet of essays and computer-generated photographs of themselves, which introduced the essays and adorned the cover. Carolyn and I assigned each rural undergraduate tutor to a graduate student/TA tutor in the writing center. The rural students would be faxed a paper the TA was about to tutor and listen in on the session. At the end of each session, the Bethel tutor and the UAF-TA would discuss techniques. As in the case of trying to "bring in" in the native students at Rural Student Services, the Native tutors listened very politely and asked virtually no questions about the paper or the session.

Gradually, we learned the two-year students were intimidated both by the advanced level of the papers being worked on and the "expert" stance of the tutor. What appeared collaborative to us did not seem so to them. After trying some other scenarios, we eventually used an undergraduate tutor doing "mock" sessions to the whole group of native tutors. Only as a group of several native peers dealing with a single white undergraduate peer tutor from UAF did they feel comfortable asking questions. The choice of Aliesha Peterson as the UAF peer tutor was as important as the group to individual ratio. She was an experienced, confident undergraduate tutor who was popular with on-campus Native students, and she was always willing to take risks.

When the Bethel tutors were comfortable talking with Aliesha via tele-conference during their regular tutor-training class, we asked them what kinds of papers they wanted to practice tutoring. The answer was not subject-oriented. They were not as concerned with WHAT they were going to tutor, but WHO. They wanted to tutor a native student, preferably one who spoke Yup'ik. Aliesha could not speak Yup'ik while some of the Bethel tutors did. Since they wanted to experiment with tutoring content in Yup'ik, Aliesha agreed to collaborate with Bob Alouyishas in tutoring a UAF Yup'ik student. At each session Bob and Aliesha read the paper ahead of time. At the appointed time, the student and Aliesha would call Bob and tutoring would begin. After the Yup'ik telephone session, the student explained the advice she had been given to Aliesha in English. Out of their dialogue the student determined the changes she would make. The changes both in the relation to the Native tutor and the Native student were marked. The Yup'ik tutor's marked superiority to the UAF tutor both in language and cultural background with the student-client resulted in his vocally engaged participation in the session. The student received advice from a physically distant but culturally close authority, but only she could translate the data received and interpret its significance for the English-speaking UAF tutor. Thus, she felt she had the authority to be responsible for her choices. The strength of language and culture between Bob and the student was a stronger force than the usually intimidating proximity of the white, English-speaking peer tutor. As a triad they negotiated a polyphonic conversation in which the student became the empowered final authority.

The development of these "collaborative" experiences show that neither centripetal of centrifugal forces act in a vacuum. The centralized writing center, founded on collaborative learning theories that relaxed the boundaries of the teacher-authorized classroom, can, in turn become an authorized space. Both of those centers of learning provide valuable services to the student. If there were no prior "authoritative" centripetal

power--a core of confidence born out of some sense of authority--the centrifugal force would dissolve into chaos.

Writing centers can become more truly collaborative by becoming conscious of their own centripetal power and finding ways to loosen it. We need a strong center, but one with "loopholes." We can venture out of the sanctum of the "center." We can even move beyond the validated space of the "satellite center." Tele-fax tutoring would work as well, and certainly less expensively, in a large urban area where students have difficulty getting to a central location. We can also take some of the techniques learned from these experiments back to the center to create a more person-centered, collaborative environment for both tutor and student. The significant space is not that between physical bodies but between mutually authoritative speakers in dialogue.

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